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AUTHOR Kusimo, Patricia S.

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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes impacts of the Brown decision on school segregation and the educational condition of rural African American students today. In the 1990s, over 90 percent of rural African Americans live in the South and continue to suffer from high poverty rates and low educational attainment. In 1954, the Supreme Court decision in Brown et al v. Board of Education of Topeka et al abolished laws requiring or permitting school segregation in 21 states. Integration was achieved primarily by closing schools in African American neighborhoods and busing students. In response, many White communities withdrew support for public schools and established White private academies. In addition, resegregation occurred within schools via course assignments and "ability grouping." Other factors affecting educational outcomes for rural African Americans include combined negative effects of minority status and rurality, the massive loss of African American educators due to integration-related school closings and layoffs, educators' lack of focus on school factors that contribute to low achievement, and student resistance to "White" school norms. Educators interested in improving outcomes for rural African Americans can begin with an emancipatory pedagogy that goes beyond teaching basic skills to engage students in critical reflection about social realities. In addition, schools must work in partnership with African American parents and communities. (Contains 20 references.) (SV)

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Appalachia Educational Laboratory
P.O. Box 1348
Charleston, WV
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Rural African Americans and Education: The Legacy of the *Brown* Decision

by Patricia S. Kusimo

This Digest addresses several key questions: What is the condition of rural African Americans today? What was the *Brown* decision and how did it impact the educational opportunities of rural African American children? What factors currently impact rural African American achievement? And finally, how might educators improve outcomes for these students?

Rural African Americans in the 1990s

While about half (53%) of the African American population lives in the South, nearly all (91%) *rural* African Americans live there, most in the Black Belt. Encompassing 623 counties in 11 Old South states (AL, AR, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, TX, and VA), the Black Belt is 27% African American (ranging from 12% in some counties to 86% in others). Poverty is concentrated more heavily in the Black Belt South than in any other U.S. region and, according to 1990 census data, over half (54%) of all rural African Americans aged 25 or older living there do not have high school diplomas (Wimberley & Morris, 1996).

Theoretically, the group of rural African Americans (aged 25 to 34 in 1990) was poised to benefit from increased educational opportunity as a result of the *Brown* decision (all were born after the *Brown* decision). Yet, "Rural African-Americans age 25 to 34 had the least educational attainment in both 1980 and 1990 when compared with urban Blacks and both urban and rural Whites. . . . They had the lowest proportion of college graduates (6.1 percent, down nearly 2 percentage points from 1980), and the highest proportion of young adults who had not completed high school [29.4%]" (Butler, 1997, p. 78). These data indicate that a very large percentage of rural African Americans were still undereducated in 1990.

A Synopsis of the *Brown* Decision

After World War II, a number of cases were brought by African American plaintiffs from Delaware, Kansas, South Carolina, and Virginia, which culminated in the historic 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown et al v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.* In each of these cases, parents wanted access to equal facilities, curricula, and instructional materials for their children. They shared the widely held belief that education was the key to opportunity and upward mobility for African Americans.

The central question addressed by the Supreme Court was whether or not segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race deprives minority children of equal educational opportunities even when all else is equal. The court ruled that not only was such racial segregation harmful but, to separate Black children from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone. The courts asserted that the need for African American children to see themselves in a positive reaffirming way was just as important as curriculum, facilities, and other resources.

The *Brown* decision abolished the laws *requiring* segregated schools in 17 states and the laws *permitting* segregated schools in four other states. The Supreme Court did not outlaw *de facto* segregation typically found in cities outside of the South. Following the decision, school desegregation was not uniformly implemented. While many communities in border states began the process almost immediately, the eight states of the Deep South (AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, and VA), where Blacks constituted 22% or more of the population, did not integrate until the mid 1960s, when they were pushed by the courts (White, 1994).

The Dream Deferred: Progress of Desegregation

After being forced to integrate, many communities withdrew support for public schools and established private academies. These schools were primarily targeted at European American parents, and were sometimes supported with public funds. Virginia closed schools in Arlington, Charlottesville, and Norfolk for most of the 1958-59 school year; Prince Edward County public schools were closed for several years while a White private academy flourished with state-supported tuition (White, 1994).

Integration was achieved mostly by closing schools serving African American students and busing the students to former Whites-only schools. These arrangements were maintained during subsequent decades. Today, however, Orfield, Eaton, and the Harvard Project (1996) note a trend toward resegregation in the public schools. For the first time since 1954, school segregation is actually increasing for African-American students. This gradual undoing of integrated public schooling will be difficult to address legislatively because of the role of private schools.

Busing students was never popular among White parents. Today African American parents also express unwillingness to have their children bused, or their neighborhood school closed to achieve racial balance. Many Black parents believe their children are better off in resegregated schools because they no longer believe integrated schools offer any significant academic advantage.

This belief among some Black parents may be because of the resegregation that often occurs *within* schools via course assignments and "ability grouping." A pattern develops in which low-income minority students experience initial learning difficulties in the early grades, then are evaluated as "low-ability" and placed in low-track, remedial, or special education programs. When they get to high school, they are mostly enrolled in vocational and general programs, while Whites and high-SES students are mostly enrolled in academic programs. Because of this compounding of disadvantage, "access to learning opportunities is limited beyond what would be expected from being enrolled in either a disadvantaged school or a low-track-class" (Oakes, 1990, p. 102).

Some observers see the persistent segregation of African Americans, whether through private schooling, resistance to busing, or tracking, as a result of African American parents' lack of ability to mobilize power and resources (Lipman, 1997; McCarthy, 1993). Decision-making structures in many rural communities limit the influence African American parents (especially those with low incomes) can have on educational decisions affecting their children. They have few avenues by which they can challenge curriculum choices, instructional strategies, or course placement decisions. School officials often dismiss African American students' absence in advanced and college preparatory courses as a normal reflection of students' interests, academic talents, and parents' lack

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of interest. However, African American parents have long cared deeply about education and so have their children. Billingsley reminds us:

> The value African-Americans place on education has always been extraordinarily high. There is a deep historical and cultural belief in the efficacy of education. Blacks have sought education in every conceivable manner and at every level. (Billingsley, 1992, p. 181)

Other Factors Affecting Rural African American Students

Besides the ongoing effects of segregation, a number of other factors affect educational outcomes for rural African Americans.

Minority status and rurality. National data indicate African American students, as a sub-population, still do not score on par with their European American counterparts. A recent study by Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (1998) found that students in rural, small-town locations (Southern region states such as AL, AR, DE, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, and WV) score significantly below students in rural areas nationwide. Rural schools in all states have less money and poorer educational programs than their more wealthy urban neighbors (Alexander, 1990).

The loss of African American educators. In the old segregated school system, Black children attended schools operated mostly by skilled Black educators. These teachers and administrators were better credentialed and more experienced than their White counterparts (Southern Education Reporting Service, 1959). With integration came massive layoffs: 38,000 African Americans in 17 states lost their positions as teachers and administrators between 1954 and 1965 (Holmes, 1990; King, 1993). Things haven't been the same since. As recently as the 1995-96 school year, African American teachers comprised only 7.3% of the teaching force in public schools (National Education Association, 1997).

For many African American children, African American teachers represent surrogate parent figures, acting as disciplinarians, counselors, role models, and advocates. According to one study, low-achieving African American students benefit most from relationships with African American teachers (King, 1993). African American teachers also tend not to rationalize student failure by blaming family or society (Foster, 1990).

Educators' lack of focus on school factors. Research on effective schools shows that when teachers focus on factors they can control (instructional issues) instead of factors out of their control (such as students' background) students do better in school. Teachers with this focus, regardless of ethnicity, bring a strong sense of personal and professional efficacy to the classroom.

Resistence to school norms. Instead of submitting to the norms of a school establishment many students experience as oppressive, some students reject European American speech patterns and devalue high academic achievement, inadvertently limiting themselves (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; King, 1993; Ogbu, 1990). However, other African American students respond in the opposite way. These high-achieving African American students cite their awareness of racism and prejudice as a reason to excel, thus preparing themselves to fight these evils (King, 1993; Sanders, 1997).

Improving Outcomes: Two Powerful Approaches

First, educators interested in improving outcomes for rural African American students can begin with an *emancipatory pedagogy*, which goes beyond teaching basic skills to engaging students in critical reflection about realities such as social injustice (King, 1993).

In my own experience as an African American student in segregated schools, we were told we would have to be twice as good as Whites, and were prepared to expect racism and bigotry. But we were also taught we could "fight back" by being excellent. Today, the ranks of African American teachers, the traditional orators of that message, have diminished. And some African American teachers no longer see advocacy, role-modeling, and surrogate parenting as parts of their job. It is possible, though, for teachers of any ethnicity to academically empower rural African American students. Achievement data indicate the pressing need to carry the message that excellence is *possible* and *essential* for rural African American students.

Second, educational research indicates that schools can best improve the academic achievement of African American children only when they work in partnership with parents. Forty-four years after the *Brown* decision, *educators must join with African American communities* that have lacked access to resources or power to address together the ongoing educational crisis playing itself out in rural counties, particularly in the South. As Delpit explains,

> Appropriate education for poor children and children of color can only be devised in consultation with adults who share their culture. Black parents, teachers of color, and members of poor communities must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest. (Delpit, 1988, p. 296)

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Patricia S. Kusimo, Ph.D., is a project leader at Appalachia Educational Laboratory, and focuses her work on the academic achievement of underrepresented groups.

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